



INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SOCIALT ARBETE

Unaccompanied minors (un-)made in Sweden – Ungrievable lives and access to rights produced through policy

ISBN: 978-91-88267-20-7

By

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Akademisk avhandling

som med tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorexamen framläggs till offentlig granskning

fredagen den 28 maj 2021, kl. 13:15 i Europasalen, Wallenberg Conference Center,
Medicinaregatan 20 A, Göteborg

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ABSTRACT

Title: Unaccompanied minors (un-)made in Sweden – Ungrievable lives and access to rights produced through policy

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Key words: unaccompanied minors, borders, migration policy, social work, WPR, asylum, citizenship enactment, jouissance, anti-racism, solidarity, ethics

ISBN: 978-91-88267-20-7 (PRINT)

ISBN: 978-91-88267-21-4 (PDF)

Internet: <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/68257>

On 24 November 2015, the Swedish prime minister announced a new, restrictive asylum policy with the explicit aim of placing Sweden at the EU minimum level in terms of refugee reception. At the centre of the policy debate was the figure of the unaccompanied minor. In this thesis, the meanings associated with the concept of unaccompaniedness in Swedish legislation is explored in order to critically analyze the changes that took place during and after 2015.

With a theory-method design drawing on post-structural policy analysis and discourse theory, seven government bills are analyzed together with interviews with welfare workers/activists and young persons affected by the policy changes. What the government bills have in common is the centrality of the concept of unaccompaniedness. The reforms are positioned at the intersection of social work and migration policy: custodianship for asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors, reception in municipalities under the Social Services Act, construction of alternative “Supported Housing” services aimed at this target group and other youth, age estimations in the asylum process and exception rules as a path to residence permits based on participation in upper secondary education.

The main results indicate that the way in which unaccompanied minors are described as different from children in general and thus in need of other support and other rights, has existed long before the restriction laws from 2015. The discursive formation with a specific position for unaccompanied minors has thus not undergone a total transformation. Rather, additional layering of meanings associated with the concept has been added. In the reforms from 2005-2006, unaccompanied minors are mainly regarded as grievable lives due to the vulnerability associated with their specific migration experience and being without guardians. Through various political logics, where economy and anti-immigrant sentiments have an impact, subjects are increasingly excluded from this position. They are attributed negative associations and disqualified from being both children and vulnerable. This demarcation defines who can be a “real” child and thus a grievable life with the right to protection and rights. The exception rules that were presented in 2017-2018, acknowledge the precarious position created through the restrictive reforms. A pathway to residence permit through participation in upper secondary education was provided. Thereby, the figure of the unaccompanied minor was also re-invented from a child refugee to an international student and potential labour migrant.

In this thesis, it is argued that lives are constructed as grievable and not through specific meanings given to the term vulnerability in relation to concepts of childhood, borders, racialization and the nation. These processes of meaning-making shape subject positions and define access to rights. However, policy is produced in a political context and dependent on social practices. Thus it is relevant to see policy in relation to social work practice, social movements and the populations affected, who through acts of citizenship and of solidarity challenge the dominant border regime.